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ABSTRACT

The licensing of public relations practitioners by government has long been controversial. A survey was conducted of members of the public relations division of the Association for Education in Journalism under the auspices of the division's committee on professional freedom and responsibility. One-hundred and sixty-one questionnaires were mailed asking whether practioners should be licensed; if so, by federal or state governments, and by written or oral tests or by coursework; and if not, should there be professional monitoring of practices. Sixty-three questionnaires were returned, a 39% response rate. Forty-four members were opposed to any licensing of public relations practitioners (69.8%). However, 34 of those opposing licensing (77.3%) believed that there is a need to monitor public relations practices to achieve higher standards of professionalism. Many of those submitting negative responses to licensing suggested alternatives such as higher professional standards, better education, and improved training. Discussion of this question in public relations courses is recommended to prepare students for professional realities. (DF)

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A Report on the

SURVEY OF PUBLIC RELATIONS DIVISION/AEJ MEMBERS ON LICENSING PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTITIONERS

Spring, 1977

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Licensing of public relations practitioners by government has been a topic of discussion for years. Some prominent practitioners strongly favor licensing, while other equally prominent PR people are unalterably opposed. There is a group who, although not in favor of licensing, feel it is inevitable, and there is, undoubtedly, a large group of people who haven't made up their minds.

Public Relations Division members of AEJ are opposed to governmental licensing (44/69.8%) of public relations practitioners by a 2.5 to 1 ratio. However, those opposing licensing believe there is a need to monitor public relations practices (34/77.3%) to achieve professionalism by a 4 to 1 ratio. (This ratio may be askewed because of a misinterpretation of the word "monitor" in the question. Many of the respondents who said no also listed as alternatives to licensing stepped up standards through PRSA and professional associations, better education, training, etc.)

These figures come from a survey of division members conducted this spring under the auspices of the division's Professional Freedom and Responsibility Committee. Returns on the 161 questionnaires mailed totaled 63 or 39%.

The following table summarizes the results.

Public Relations Division/Association for Education in Journalism
Professional Freedom and Responsibility Committee

SURVEY OF LICENSING OF PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTITIONERS

Spring, 1977

161 questionnaires mailed - 63 returned - 39%

	YES	NO	DON'T KNOW
Public Relations practitioners should be licensed by the government	17 27%	44 69.8%	2 3.2%

Of those favoring licensing -

Licensing should be by	FEDERAL GOV'T	STATE GOV'T	DON'T KNOW
	2 * 11.8%	14 82.3%	1 5.9%

censing should be chieved by **	WRITTEN EXAM	ORAL EXAM	COURSEWORK
	15 88.2%	12 70.6%	10 58.8%

* One respondent hopes for federal licensing, but thinks it will be state.
** Totals more than 100% because of multiple answers.

Of those opposed to licensing -

	YES	NO	DON'T KNOW
Public relations practices should be monitored to achieve professionalism	34 77.3%	8 18.2%	2 4.5%

OPPOSITION TO LICENSING

The reasons for opposing licensing are varied, but the prevalent reason (noted by almost half the opposers) was infringement on First Amendment rights -- freedom of speech and press. PR practitioners, respondents replied, are in the communications field as newspaper people and broadcasters thus licensing would be unconstitutional.

Other reasons mentioned for opposing licensing were government control of and interference with business (bureaucracy); professionalism cannot be legislated; licensing does not insure high standards; licensing is not necessary for professionalism; public relations practices are too diverse and complex; there are a variety of activities involved; and PR is a creative activity, thus not lending itself to licensing.

As one respondent wrote: "How do you tell 'practitioners' from 'spokesmen' for an organization. How would you define a 'public relations practitioner' and his or her duties that would be subject to 'review'."

Two people who opposed government licensing said an independent agency or the professionals should do the licensing. One person noted PR is not like law or medicine, and another was adamant that PR is neither a profession (law, medicine) nor a trade (plumbers, barbers).

ALTERNATIVES TO LICENSING

As could be expected there was no consensus on one "alternative" to licensing to achieve professionalism. There were, however, a number of suggestions which combined would probably constitute an alternative. Of the several suggestions made by respondents, most often mentioned were self-policing by the profession and increased activity of professional organizations (PRSA was mentioned specifically a number of times). A number of people mentioning these alternatives indicated that whatever the procedure there must be "clout" so standards can be enforced.

The accreditation program of PRSA was noted as an alternative -- expansion of the program and a campaign to educate the public and business on what public relations and the accreditation program means. One respondent felt that business was not aware of the accreditation program and therefore not looking for accredited PR people.

Improved education was mentioned, including better schooling, better continuing education through seminars, and closer liaison between professionals and education/teachers.

A respondent said: "Accreditation is the answer; yet several of us with experience and the PhD have not bothered to sit for the examination. ... How many PR instructors are now APR rated?" (This person also suggested an instructor with certain requirements

could submit a project report and credentials instead of taking the written exam.)

Publicity (disclosure) on PR practices, good and bad, through articles, surveys, publications was mentioned a number of times.

This was strongly enunciated by one respondent: "As the opportunity developes, many of our foremost pros and educators need to speak out, for and against issues of critical importance. The backseat, don't rock the boat attitude of far too many pros and educators must change. Let's hear it for good actions and let's say 'no' to wrong actions, by members of the field, and clients and management -- when necessary."

A couple of people suggested PR have something akin to the (newspaper) press councils now in operation in some places, and one respondent suggested an ombudsman.

FAVORING LICENSING

Of those respondents favoring licensing (17/27%) by the government, 82.3% (14) said it should be done by the state government, while 11.8% (2) said the federal government, and 5.9% (1) didn't know. Other comments included licensing should be on a (annual) renewal basis; practitioners should earn credentials through a university, like teachers; practitioners should be certified for specialties (e.g., hospital, financial); PRSA should do the licensing by authority from the state government; and there should be a provision for para-PR people to work before licensing.

Almost half (8/47%) of the respondents who favored licensing thought it should be achieved through a combination of written and oral exams and coursework. Favoring a written exam only were 23.5% (4), and written and oral exams, 17.6% (3). Favoring coursework only, or coursework and an oral exam were one respondent each. One respondent also noted the person applying for a license should prove capabilities through an internship or apprenticeship.

Professionalism was the most mentioned reason for favoring licensing. More than 2/3's (12) who favored licensing said it would be a step towards achieving and enforcing professionalism, while more than 1/3 (6) said it would set standards for professionalism and identify professional preparation.

One respondent said: "There can be no profession without those who practice therein being licensed by other than their peers. Licensing would establish public relations as a profession AND would not prevent those who bypassed licensing to work in PR."

More than half (10) said it would restrict practice to those who qualify, control entry and exit in the profession, and weed out "quacks."

Two comments on this were: "Until there is controlled access, public relations cannot be a profession." "I'm becoming more and more convinced this is the only way to remove the charlatans and cheaters. I realize even licensed practitioners can be dishonest, but there would no longer be an open invitation for any 'Joe' to call himself a P. R. practitioner."

Other comments were PRSA accreditation program has had only limited success. Only a small percentage of practitioners belong to PRSA and that they can just resign if disciplined.

ENFORCING LICENSING

The most common response to enforcing licensing was legislation and procedures similar to law, medicine, or accounting; through review boards of professionals with quasi-legal powers at state or regional levels.

Other comments included persons would not be allowed to practice PR without a license or use PR Certified title. Violators should be prosecuted for unlawful use of title, and licenses be revoked.

One suggestion was to have PRSA chapters in states, under a grant of authority from the state government, set standards and qualifications for licensing and practice subject to approval of national PRSA; legal infractions would be handled by the state and ethical infractions handled by PRSA.

Another suggestion was to issue a basic credential for a three to five year term, and a lifetime credential after a practitioner meets additional requirements.

MISCELLANEOUS

Dr. Ken O. Smith, national PRSA president, believes some form of licensing is inevitable. He reports that PRSA has a "stand-by model licensing" statute drafted to present if needed. Thus far, he said, it hasn't been needed, but in the past couple of years there has been discussion in several states, particularly California and Florida.

In 1973 (April 16) J. Handly Wright, former vice president of the Association of American Railroads and past president of PRSA, prepared a memorandum for Betsy Ann Plank, then PRSA president, on the pros and cons of licensing. Most of the pros and cons regarding licensing and its alternatives mentioned by PRD/AEJ respondents concur with the points in Wright's paper. In his bibliography of reference materials, Wright notes a Model Draft from California, 1/23/73; Model Draft from Decker and McCammond, 2/20/73; and Model Draft, source unidentified, 2/5/73.

He concludes "... opinions within the society are becoming polarized and that relatively few of the society's 7,000 members have been heard from on the subject. ... provide the Board and Assembly with a more reliable and authentic picture of membership opinion."

A SIDE NOTE

I distributed the licensing questionnaire to some of my PR students (beginning sophomores and juniors to graduating seniors --

no count on how many of each.) Licensing has not been discussed in classes except peripherally when we talked about PRSA accreditation. Twenty responded and several students were interested enough to ask to have a day or two to think about the subject. (I present the results without comment.)

Favoring licensing were 45% (9), opposing licensing were 35% (7) and didn't know, 20% (4). Of those who favored licensing, 44.5% (4) said the federal government should do it, 33.3% (3) said the state government, and 22.2% (2) said a PR association. These people said licensing should be achieved by written exam (3), written and oral exams (2), written and oral exams and coursework (2), written exam and coursework (1), coursework (1). Two added experience to the criteria.

Reasons pro and con on licensing paralleled PRD member reasons: favorable -- upgrade profession and standards, control entry, weed out undesirables; unfavorable -- government regulation, license no insurance of ability; self-policing through professional organization and accreditation.

CONCLUSIONS

More than two-thirds of the PRD members are opposed to government licensing of public relations practitioners, mainly because they feel it infringes on First Amendment rights. They felt the alternative to

government licensing is self-policing by the profession through professional organizations.

Slightly more than one-fourth of the members favor government licensing and most of these feel it should be done by state governments. Most feel this should be handled in a method similar to law, medicine or accounting.

But what of the other 98 division members (61%) who didn't respond. Do they fall into one of the other two categories -- opposed to licensing but feel it is inevitable or haven't made up their mind?

The pros and cons regarding licensing noted by the members seem to raise more questions than are answered. For example:

Pro-licensing -- How is the PR profession to be defined? The PR person doesn't perform in a specific area like a courtroom as a lawyer. Is the member who writes news releases or plans a fund raiser for the local service club practicing PR and in need of a license? Licensing usually indicates some recourse by clients for malpractice. Is this feasible for PR? Can it be judged in the same manner as medical malpractice?

Con-licensing -- Self-policing must be handled through some formal organization and procedure; the honor system isn't all that strong. PRSA membership is only a small fraction of the total number of PR practitioners. PRSA members who are disciplined can resign and go right on with their practice. How can all practitioners become members of a professional organization and lose the right to practice when disciplined without legal statutes?

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results of this survey, the Professional Freedom and Responsibility Committee should undertake next year an in-depth study of how the members feel about the details of licensing and/or self-policing. How can the questions raised in the conclusions and others be answered.

An effort should be made to find out how the 61% of the members who didn't respond to this survey feel.

Public Relations instructors should be encouraged to include in some course a discussion of the licensing question so graduates will have some familiarity with the subject when they have to face it.

This report be forwarded to the officers and board of the Public Relations Society of America.